

INQUIRY INTO SPORTSGROUND MANAGEMENT IN NSW

SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON
PUBLIC WORKS, PARLIAMENT HOUSE,
MACQUARIE STREET, SYDNEY

BY NSW NETBALL ASSOCIATION LTD.
(NETBALL NSW)
PO BOX 396 LIDCOMBE 1825

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OVERVIEW

Netball is played predominantly by females aged from 5 years upwards with some registered members still playing well past 65 years of age. It is the most popular female sport in Australia. In New South Wales (NSW) there are over 107,000 registered members. In addition there are many people who play netball on a social basis that are not members of Netball NSW. There is an increased need for appropriate playing facilities for our sport.

The game of netball provides an opportunity for the under represented groups of women, indigenous peoples, people with a disability (PWD), those living in rural communities and culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD) to participate in a social environment that has many positive community outcomes. Except for a small number of netball associations that provide competitions specifically for PWD all of these identified groups are integrated within the total netball playing structure and environment.

Netball has and continues to be administered by a volunteer management structure that is unequalled in any other sport. This volunteer structure is the foundation upon which district netball associations have been able to provide a structured low-cost sport across all communities in NSW. The one negative attached to volunteer management has, in the past been an inability to champion the cause of our sport to achieve outcomes that compare with those of other sports. While this is improving there is still, in many rural areas a belief that the priority needs of netball are neither clearly understood nor accepted by local government councillors and officers. All too often netball infrastructure development is either placed at the bottom of the council list when compared with male dominated sports or is deferred because the sport itself is not able to contribute sufficient finance for the project to proceed. As a consequence the sport is frequently left with an infrastructure that is neither cost-effective nor suitable for long-term use.

Netball provides social outcomes unlike many other sports. Netball

- teaches and provides discipline in terms of play and structure;
- provides a structured sporting competition enhancing social cohesion;
- enhances interpersonal skills for lifestyles outside sport;
- provides a structure that presents an alternative to the world of abuse and lack of purpose;
- in metropolitan and rural communities in particular provides a sport that enables participation and enjoyment by persons from all socio-economic backgrounds;
- provides a platform for excellent health outcomes – it is a major determinant in overcoming obesity in school age children – while there are other general preventive health benefits through the playing of an outdoor sport.

Within their charters of operation both State government and local government councils have an obligation to provide appropriate sportsground facilities for all community groups balanced against an overarching requirement to provide both passive and active recreation facilities in a multicultural society that now demands inordinate resources from both spheres of government.

1. ADEQUACY OF PROVISION OF QUALITY SPORTSGROUNDS TO MEET COMMUNITY NEEDS ACROSS NSW

Netball is classed as an active organised sport requiring hard court surfaces. It is officially classed as a contact and collision sport. It is played in practically every local government council area in NSW. Where netball courts are not provided in a local government area it is generally because the district netball association services its members across more than one council area. Equally, in a small number of council areas there is more than one district netball association. This number is growing; particularly in council areas where councils undertake the amalgamation process instituted by State government.

Except in a minority of cases the structure of netball provides for all matches in a competition to be played at one venue. There are major reasons for this method of operation. In the majority of cases netball operates under a club structure where a number of teams (in the metropolitan area some clubs have more than 45 teams) play against other club teams in age groups and under a senior graded structure. Umpires are provided for each match, from each club generally on a cross-drawn basis. In those instances where matches are not played at the one venue it is usually because further development is precluded by space.

In some rural areas netball is played in conjunction with rugby league and Australian rules football matches on a home and away basis where a netball court is provided alongside the rugby league or Australian rules oval.

Anecdotally, the needs of the netball community, particularly in rural NSW has suffered at the expense of other sports. This is attributed to the markedly different structure of the operation of netball compared with other male dominated sports in regional communities, particularly rugby league and Australian rules. Unlike most other sports netball has and will continue to rely upon a strong volunteer structure for its administration and operation. The one negative associated with this mode of operation has been an inability to negotiate infrastructure needs when compared with negotiations undertaken by staff employed by sports organisations.

At present neither State nor local government per se adequately provides for the needs of netball. While many local netball associations do have an excellent working relationship with local government and do have facilities that vary from good to excellent, the provision of these facilities is frequently the result of large monetary contributions by the local netball association to the relevant local government council. While this method of funding is supported it is suggested that it is inverse to the funding provided by many other sports to infrastructure sporting field development in local government.

There are many areas across the State where players are still playing netball on grass courts of a substandard nature while in other areas there is an inadequate number of courts to meet local needs.

Clearly, the number of netball courts together with the ability to offer competitions can only be based on membership. Sometimes the 'chicken and egg' syndrome prevents the growth of membership and thus prevents the need for additional courts. If there are insufficient or inadequate netball courts and associated facilities people are turned away from playing. The more that people are turned away the less viable the sport becomes. Consequently people either take up another more passive sport or simply give up playing sport altogether.

The provision of adequate sportsgrounds requires with it a concomitant commitment to the provision of adequate amenities. There is a special need for the provision of adequate toilet and change facilities for women to be located adjacent to netball courts. This is frequently overlooked or at worst netball players are directed to either a toilet block some distance from the netball courts or to a toilet block purpose built for a male sport.

The provision of adequate sportsgrounds must also include the provision of adequate and appropriate amenities.

2. COST AND REVENUE ARRANGEMENTS INCLUDING CAPITAL UPGRADES

Capital upgrades for netball while costly are the most cost-effective of all capital upgrades undertaken in sportsground development.

The provision of sealed netball courts once undertaken ensures a low maintenance environment. Once complete the only maintenance required is the replacement of goal rings when damaged by vandals (at least one local council has developed a near vandal proof goal ring), line marking every five years and re-sealing of the courts every ten years.

The significant issue for consideration is the need to provide sealed netball courts. Clearly, where sealed courts are provided sportsground rehabilitation other than when re-sealing takes place is not required.

Where amenities blocks are provided maintenance generally relates to an established R&M schedule and undertaking any special repair work caused by vandals. In this context many netball associations now utilise the services of security companies with back to base alarm systems installed at netball association cost.

Another significant cost is the installation of field lighting to enable night netball matches as well as providing a safe training environment. In areas where there are large numbers of courts there is often a requirement for a lesser number of courts to be lit. In any new development it makes sense to plan court lighting, an amenities building, clubrooms, sealed car park and sealed courts all in the action.

While some capital improvements are funded by councils through capital assistance programs and the regional sports facility grant process through the Department of Sport and Recreation the requirement for the applicant to meet 50% of the cost sometimes is beyond the reach of the local netball association particularly when local councils either do not commit funds or alternatively limit the amount of funds they will allocate to female sport.

Every council is the beneficiary of Section 94 Development funding. Because netball is played centrally at one venue in a local government area and the beneficiaries of these netball facilities are frequently the residents who move into new release areas it is recommended that Government encourage and if necessary legislate for the provision of certain of these funds to be directed to regional sporting field infrastructure development particularly where that infrastructure is in established areas.

This approval should be restricted to those sports that only have a regional sporting facility in the local government area. In those council areas where there is more than local netball association resulting from council amalgamations special consideration and approval should be extended to those associations affected by the amalgamation decision.

Netball is a cost-effective outdoor sport. It has a high turnover of people in a small area each day. It has one of the highest turnovers of any sport. By way of comparison the following examples are provided:

- *Cricket*

22 people usually tie up a cricket field for 4 to 6 hours. If there are two matches in one day you have 44 to 50 people involved. A cricket field is very high maintenance, it involves mowing of the cricket field, preparation and rolling of the pitch and for 1st class games it is even more labour intensive

- *Rugby league, Australian rules football, football (soccer)*

These are high maintenance sportsgrounds requiring regular mowing of fields, marking of fields, maintenance of perimeter fencing and a turnover of between 30 and 40 people (depending upon the code) every 90 minutes – 100 minutes. For Rugby League this would provide a turnover of 150 people in one day.

- *Netball*

Netball courts are low maintenance. Hard courts are resurfaced every 10 years and re-lined approximately every 5 years. In the size of a rugby league field you can fit around 15 netball courts and have a turnover of 300 players every 70 minutes or 1800 people in one day.

The most difficult and vexatious of all in negotiations between district netball associations and local government has been the financial contribution to councils for ground use on an equity basis. Many councils have in place sports councils or sports advisory groups that recommend to council the annual fee to be paid for the hire or lease for the relevant sportsground while others simply set the fee through an internal management process.

While total cost recovery for sportsground management is not possible nor should it be it is our view that there should at least be a semblance of equity in establishing the fees paid by various sporting bodies to councils. It is suggested that the fees paid should be on a pro rata basis commensurate with the time and cost expended by councils to maintain various sportsgrounds.

It appears that there are currently three fee structure models in place and the following comments are made in relation to each model.

(i) Court Hire Fee

This is considered to be the most equitable of all. Councils who operate under this arrangement have usually adopted a policy of promotion and assistance for the conduct of sport in their local government area. There are usually a lesser number of objections from ratepayers who are unsympathetic to sportsground development and opposed to expenditure on repairs and maintenance.

In the case of netball, hire rates are usually based on the number of courts hired together whether or not the netball courts have lighting maintained but not necessarily paid for by the council.

(ii) Lease Arrangement

The lease arrangement usually involves the transfer of responsibility by council to the local district netball association for minor repairs and maintenance of the clubrooms and netball courts. Lease arrangements are usually onerous on the sport and frequently involve disputation with council staff as to who is responsible for repairs and maintenance particularly when vandals damage property or graffiti is involved.

(iii) Player Levy Arrangement

Some councils have adopted a player levy arrangement. From a netball perspective this is the most iniquitous fee cost of all. Player levees vary greatly between local government areas. The matter has been further exacerbated following the amalgamation of some councils particularly in rural NSW. There are examples in one amalgamated local government area charging two netball associations different rates. One district netball association is charged a court hire fee based on the number of courts used while the other is charged a player levee based on the registered number of netball players.

This method is not without its flaws. If a sport does not declare all its members the contribution to council is reduced. Equally this inhibits planning for future growth.

The levee method of charging is detrimental to netball. By way of example a netball association may have fifteen netball courts (fitting into one rugby league field) and 2,000 members. If they are charged \$2.00 per player the annual levy is \$4,000.00.

The greater majority of netball members are juniors, thus the levee impost falls back to payment by parents or guardians with the resultant effect of juniors not registering for netball. The inequity is further exacerbated when compared where 1,000 rugby league members @ \$2.00 pay only \$2,000.00 and require seven rugby fields. The maintenance costs are inequitable (low cost vs high cost) between the two sports and invariably there is no credit given for the level of contribution to be offset for future infrastructure upgrade.

Recent anecdotal evidence suggests that some council's now see this method of fee charging as most beneficial in meeting their own financial shortfalls and furthermore it appears that there is a propensity to significantly increase the player levee to unreasonable levels – in one instance to \$20.00 per player per annum. Such a move would bankrupt most rural netball associations.

The playing of organised junior sport is reliant upon the financial ability of parents or guardians. Historically, evidence indicates that where parents have restricted disposable income for sport the commitment to male members is met before female members of the family.

It is recommended that all Council's be encouraged to adopt a hire fee arrangement for sportsgrounds.

3. ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS ASSOCIATED WITH SPORTSGROUND MANAGEMENT

Environmental issues are not a major concern for netball. While sealed netball courts can deteriorate through cracking in times of drought the major determinate in deterioration is lack of use. Rather than having to rely on water like other sportsgrounds, perhaps the major environmental issue for netball is the need for appropriate shelter from thunderstorm activity or excessive heat as required.

Obviously, a reliable supply of power and water is essential for amenities. Where possible recycling systems should be implemented.

4. EFFECTIVENESS OF CURRENT ADMINISTRATION OF SPORTSGROUNDS BY VARIOUS PROVIDERS INCLUDING COUNCILS, STATE GOVERNMENT (INCLUDING SCHOOLS) AND PRIVATE OPERATORS

The overall management of netball courts by councils is regarded as satisfactory. While there are some examples of neglect, particularly in those council areas where the condition of courts presents occupational health and safety issue the majority of sealed courts remain playable.

In recent years there has been a greater willingness for schools to hire out their facilities for community based sports.

One of the more significant areas where State government, schools and private operators can and should become providers is through the availability, management and operation of indoor venues that complement outdoor sportsgrounds.

Netball is a classic example of where the majority of players use the open environment for playing 'grass roots' netball and then progress to the elite level where play is conducted indoors. The provision of indoor venues is costly as is the maintenance. There is an opportunity for multi-purpose venues to be constructed in local government areas where such facilities are not readily available through schools or other operators. The capital funding for the provision of these facilities should be met in a joint venture arrangement by State and local governments.

In this context Netball NSW has made a comprehensive submission to the NSW Government for the provision of a purpose built indoor centre and associated outdoor courts in the Western Parklands to be the Netball Centre of Excellence for NSW. This project cannot proceed with Government funding.

5. IMPACT ON HEALTH OUTCOMES AND SOCIAL COHESION, PARTICULARLY IN DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

Netball is a low cost sport that can be played by anyone. The level of organisation is dependent upon the commitment provided by its volunteer base.

From a Netball NSW perspective netball is offered as an organised, disciplined sport that provides social cohesiveness particularly to those in rural areas.

It provides for a sense of identity, cohesiveness and allows for people of all ages but particularly youth from disadvantaged backgrounds to be part of a team. By way of example Netball NSW has employed through a grant, a person in Dubbo specifically directed to engaging indigenous Australians to play netball.

This program has been an outstanding success. It has not only provided the local community with a sense of purpose but it has also provided alternatives to members of the indigenous community in achieving better health outcomes through exercise and training programs.

In Cobar the 'Far Western Academy' netball team has been established. This program has enabled a group of young women to come together from different cultures to be a cohesive group that has not only benefited from the playing of sport in terms of better health outcomes but also in terms of social development.

The offering of netball as a sport to young females in a team environment allows them to train and play together and thus exercise as a group without the social dislocation of being alone and therefore left to their own devices.

By playing a team sport young women and girls are not exposed to the same extent to the vagaries of adverse health outcomes particularly obesity, anorexia or bulimia as those who do not.

There is no doubt that netball has played a very positive role in providing better health and social outcomes throughout the State.

6. TRAFFIC, NOISE AND OTHER DIRECT IMPACTS ON RESIDENTIAL AMENITY

There are two major considerations in terms of noise insofar as the conduct of netball is concerned. The first is the complaint by some of the incessant noise by whistles while matches are in progress and the second is the volume of traffic as players and spectators come and go on 'the hour'.

Clearly, whistles can present an environmental noise hazard to those who wish for a totally noise free environment. However the impact can be significantly lessened by the location of netball facilities within designated parklands or sportsground specific locations. Ideally, the location of netball courts in open space that meets the needs of passive and active recreational users generally leads to a societal balance.

Because there is a high turnover of players in a concentrated area it is essential that there be sufficient car parking available within a reasonable walking distance of netball courts. Considerations include player safety, particularly young children and the ability for them to be adequately supervised.

There is anecdotal evidence that environmental noise complaints including various impacts on residential amenity arise from complainants who move into an area after the user has been operating at a venue for some considerable time.

In any overall assessment and on any test of reasonableness it is suggested that impacts on residential amenity should take into account the frequency of when the sport is played, the overall impact on the environment in modern society and perhaps most importantly, the relative time-frame between the lodgement of objections or complaints compared with length of residency by the complainant.

7. AFFECT OF LITIGATION AND INSURANCE COSTS ON FINANCIAL VIABILITY

There is no doubt that until the State government introduced legislation to protect 'Good Samaritans' and to limit liability in respect of certain litigation in terms of sporting endeavour that the impact of litigation and potential for litigation had a significant affect on council hire fees. The ability of councils to provide equipment that was assessed as safe and in times of drought playing fields that were deemed 'safe' was questioned and led to a number of councils either closing playgrounds and playing fields.

All district netball associations affiliated with Netball NSW have public liability insurance to the value of \$20 million under a national insurance scheme. Equally, all members also have a basic insurance cover that has been negotiated under the national scheme.

Unfortunately, some councils as a condition of hire have attempted to 'sign away' their obligations under vicarious liability by requiring (requesting) the relevant sport to accept responsibility for all litigation at the sportsground. Netball NSW has advised all district netball associations not to agree to these conditions.

There have been instances where some members have initiated a legal action against a council alleging that 'dust on the court' has caused the player to sustain a major injury. While many of these claims are settled out of court it is recommended that further investigations be undertaken to assess the viability of limiting these types of claims to one of where there is proven gross negligence. In short it is believed that no reasonable person can prevent 'dust on the court', particularly in the open environment and as such a potential litigant must accept responsibility for their actions to whether they participate particularly when the national player insurance scheme assists in meeting costs for the treatment of body injuries. Player insurance can be further supplemented with relevant private insurance.

Because amenity blocks, clubrooms and canteens are usually situated in parks or open space sportsgrounds they present as 'easy targets' for vandals to either break and enter, trash or burn. The repair cost becomes a significant portion of council's budget. Insurance cover by council is not practicable and in most cases councils elect to be either self-insurers or subscribe to a regional council insurance scheme. This matter is further exacerbated where claims are limited to a \$value frequently in excess of the damage repair bill.

It is recommended that where clubrooms or amenities are hired to an individual sport, a condition of hire should be the use of 'back to base' alarm monitoring services at cost to the hirer. Where facilities are shared or where a council is able to negotiate a fee for all its facilities the cost of alarm monitoring should be built into the hire agreement.

High visibility lighting of such buildings also leads to a diminution of graffiti and other damage.

8. ACCESS TO OPEN SPACE FOR ACTIVE AND PASSIVE RECREATIONAL USERS

Societal demands for open space to meet both active and passive recreational needs are at a premium. In established metropolitan areas the ability to plan further open space is nigh on impossible and only ever achieved through a costly land resumption process.

In these cases it is generally acknowledged that resumed land should be for passive recreational use as in practically all cases the area of land resumed is insufficient for the development of sportsgrounds and associated parking. In new release areas there is an opportunity through innovative planning processes to provide open space for both active and passive recreational users.

While Government can legislate for minimum standards of open space in any new development it is suggested that consultation with both peak and local sporting groups is also relevant in determining future space for recreation use.

10 August 2006

The Committee Manager
Standing Committee on Public Works
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney 2000

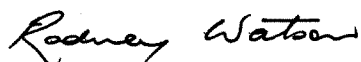
Dear Sir

Attached is the submission by Netball NSW to the Standing Committee on Public Works for consideration by the Inquiry into Sportsground Management in NSW.

If there are any matters that require further elaboration I can be contacted on 9833 1122 (work) or 0412 470 102.

The Board of Directors or its delegate would be pleased to attend any oral hearing should the Committee consider it appropriate during the course of their enquiries.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rodney Watson".

Rodney Watson
Vice-President